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Washington's airport baggage scales calibrate well in WSDA inspection

OLYMPIA –Travelers at Washington's airports have a lot on their minds as they approach airline check-in baggage stations this busy holiday season, but having to worry about the accuracy of airline scales used to weigh their luggage shouldn't cause concern.

Only one of 179 airport baggage scales weighed inaccurately in favor of an airline. According to inspections done at five commercial service airports by Weights and Measures inspectors from the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), 95 percent of the state's airport scales meet stringent weight and other compliance standards.

In the past few weeks, WSDA inspectors tested airport passenger baggage scales across the state. The heaviest work load was at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport where 120 scales at 13 airline check-in locations were inspected. No scales were taken out of service; however, eight scales were issued rejection slips for maintenance. Four scales weighed too light in favor the traveler, meaning the scale was shortchanging the actual luggage weight. Four additional scales had software glitches that didn't allow travelers to see the weight readout for their luggage, a requirement under national standards.

Last December, more than 1.3 million passengers boarded flights at Sea-Tac Airport and consumers depend on the accuracy of these scales.

"With overweight baggage fees ranging from \$39 to \$400, it's important to travelers to be assured that the scales are accurate," said Jerry Buendel, manager of WSDA's Weights & Measures Program. "Travelers should be aware of their airline's rules and fees on baggage before they come to the airport."

Buendel recommends that passengers weigh their luggage before reaching the airport and be prepared to move a few items to carry-on in case adjustments are needed. Travelers can also ask that the bag be reweighed on a different scale.

One scale at the Tri-Cities Airport in Pasco was found to round up improperly and was ordered out of service. All the scales at Spokane, Yakima and Walla Walla airports were in compliance. State inspectors noted that the scales are maintained on a regular basis by scale-maintenance companies registered by WSDA.

Travelers can look for the WSDA sticker on the scale to see that it has been inspected. Inspections are done in accordance with National Institute of Standards and Technology standards. Inspectors use up to 500 pounds of test weights and pay particular attention to accuracy at the 50 pound mark. Accuracy requirements vary depending on scale design but generally the tolerance is 0.2 pounds.

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Scales found to be out of compliance are taken out of service until repairs are made. In cases where the scale is in favor of the consumer, the airline may be allowed to continue using the device but repairs must be made within a specified time.

Consumers can file complaints with WSDA Weights and Measures by calling 360 902.1857 or through e-mail at wtsmeasures@agr.wa.gov.

WSDA Weights & Measures officials work to protect consumers and ensure businesses compete fairly. Inspectors test weighing and measuring devices such as gas pumps, grocery store scales, and truck scales. Weights and Measures also is charged with verifying the quality of motor fuel sold in Washington.

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